

Coins, cult and cultural identity:

Augustan coins, hot
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Roman baths at
Bourbonne-les-Bains



Eberhard Sauer

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To my parents

Cover picture: Two eagle *quadrantes*, the most frequent coin from the ritual deposit from the Puisard Romain at Bourbonne-les-Bains: obverse of no. 207 (left) and reverse of no. 252 (right). *Picture Eberhard Sauer.*

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Please note: the abbreviations of individual sites and the sources for the sites are listed in the comments to table 22. References for such frequently quoted Augustan coin assemblages have not always been indicated in the text.

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Abstract

Summary

A large number of Roman coins (over 4,500) was discovered in the Puisard Romain, the Roman catchment installation of a hot spring at Bourbonne-les-Bains (département Haute-Marne, France). No other deposit discovered within the entire Roman Empire contains, to my knowledge, a higher number of Augustan coins of any denomination. It is of considerable significance for the monetary history of the period. It is claimed in this work that this votive deposit, which has so far escaped the notice of the wider academic community despite its discovery as early as 1875, constitutes evidence for an army spa, possibly the earliest spa outside the Mediterranean provinces, and for a military base nearby. The composition of the coin series (most date to 16 BC/AD 1/9) leaves no doubt that deposition started as suddenly as it declined. A wider examination of coin offerings in springs points to an Italian origin for the votive custom of depositing base metal coins in springs. At this time Italy was still the main recruitment area for legionaries, the only group of foreigners whose temporary presence can explain the chronology and composition of the coin series. Most early spas in the north-west of the Empire were established by the army. As it had been widely accepted that no troops were left in the hinterland during the Germanic Wars of Augustus, the existence of a garrison is of major interest for the political history of Gaul and Germany. Statistical calculations, based upon circulation patterns as revealed by several Augustan coin assemblages, date the sudden decline in offerings to the very beginning of the first decade of the first century AD or, possibly, to the end of the previous decade. This was a time during which the Germanic War escalated, and when there would have been reasons to withdraw troops garrisoned near Bourbonne.

The main implications

• Monetary history

Being, as far as I am aware, the largest Augustan coin deposit in the Roman Empire, it sheds light on the monetary history of the period, in particular on that of the base metal coinage in the north-west of the Empire. The coin series yields, for example, further proof that the long-lived theory that the widespread early imperial practice of cutting coins into halves was the result of an alleged revaluation is untenable. Instead it is argued that this phenomenon reflects the shortage of small change.

• The origins of the use of thermal waters in temperate Europe

The deposit provides evidence for what is, to my knowledge, the earliest spa outside the Mediterranean provinces and, while little is known of the bath-house of this period, it has nevertheless important implications for the early history of bathing and the use of thermal waters in particular.

• The 'hidden signature:' how material evidence can reveal the cultural identity of the 'user group' and their distinctive cultural behaviour

Historians use coins mainly for dating purposes or as sources for monetary and political history. Legend and iconography may allow conclusions to be drawn about those who issued coins, but not on those who used them. Thus, in an archaeological context, coins are seen as being merely mute objects. In this study I attempt to show that, in some circumstances, we can go beyond such traditional methodologies. The pattern of culturally determined coin use can reveal the identity of those who used them. Because of the large number and distinctive circumstances of deposition, the coin finds from the Puisard Romain at Bourbonne present an ideal case through which we can identify the actions of foreigners, i.e. Roman soldiers, solely on the basis of how they used coins. Statistical analysis reveals unexpected patterns, such as that Roman soldiers hardly ever ritually mutilated coins whereas Gaulish civilians did so frequently. More surprisingly still, the distinctive dominance amongst divided coins of right halves with the image of Augustus suggests that, as in case of the Lacus Curtius in Rome, the Italian custom of offering coins for the well-being of emperor and state was practised in Gaul.

• The dating potential of Julio-Claudian military coin assemblages

It is argued that coin series from Julio-Claudian military sites allow closer dating of the period of military occupation than is commonly thought possible.

• Political implications for the history of Augustus' Germanic Wars

The sheer presence of an army garrison in the Gaulish hinterland in the ultimate decade of the first century BC, which was suddenly withdrawn at the turn of the millennium, has important implications for the political history of the time and may help to settle the academic dispute as to whether or not it had been Augustus' aim from the start of the Germanic Wars to establish full military control over Germany. It is argued that there were two distinctive phases in Augustus' Germanic Wars: the first ending 8/7 BC and the second lasting from c. AD 1-9. It was only in the second phase that Augustus pursued the policy of full integration of Germany into the Roman Empire, whereas in the first phase the aims had been limited to establishing indirect control (or any potential more ambitious aims had been abandoned in the course of the first phase).

Introduction

A cultural historian's approach

Bourbonne-les-Bains has produced, to my knowledge, the largest number of Augustan coins ever reported in a single deposit anywhere throughout the Empire. This statement needs qualification; the fact that the discovery was made in January 1875, and that it does not feature in any wider discussion of Augustan coinage written for over 125 years, raises the possibility that there are records of other large deposits to be discovered in future, perhaps even, as in the case of Bourbonne, published a long time ago in rather inaccessible books or journals. The discovery had been known by eminent local historians, but it never attained any international attention, which a find of this sort certainly deserves.

Coinage is by no means my main, let alone sole interest. Why then, it might be asked, did I choose to write a doctoral thesis focused on a coin deposit? This question is related to another, namely why numismatists had failed to notice the publications on the deposit for over 120 years. I had initially embarked upon writing a thesis on the wider subject of coin offerings in springs in general in the expectation that this would allow me to gain a deeper understanding of the role of natural sanctuaries in religion in antiquity. As coins are amongst the most frequent offerings in springs, and as they can be closely datable, a broad study offered the opportunity to trace developments, such as the spread and intensity of the custom in different regions and the impact of other cultural changes on this pagan practice, such as the spread of Christianity. In various recent works on the water cult in Gaul and Germany, Bourbonne-les-Bains is mentioned and there are random statements that over 4,000 or even over 4,500 coins had been discovered in the spring (Bonnard 1908, 255; 456-62 and Grenier 1960, 445-9 with relevant references; Geschwendt 1972, 78), without giving any information as to whether or not anything was known about the chronology of the coin series. As this find was about four times larger than the second-largest coin deposit in a spring in the area of central and northern Gaul, of which I had been aware, it was clearly important to find out more about this apparently exceptionally large deposit. The second-largest coin deposit in this area is from Bornheim-Roisdorf near Bonn (Dölger 1932b, 151; Geschwendt 1972, 71; Hagen 1932; *id.* 1933; Hagen 1959; Hagen 1976, 40 no. 10; Hagen/ Hagen 1965; Kessel 1876, 169; Klein 1887, 61; Metcalf 1966, 202; Zedelius 1980, 141 no. 3; 144 fig. 1.3; 145; 152). Otherwise the largest deposit from a spring from Gaul as a whole seems to be that from the spring basin dedicated to the god Nemausus at Nîmes in southern

Gaul; it contained at least about 4,000 coins (see the section on 'The preference for halves depicting Augustus ...').

Pursuing the references quoted by Bonnard and Grenier, three important reports about the coins from Bourbonne-les-Bains came to light in the Ashmolean Library (Troisgros 1975, 47) and in the Radcliffe Science Library (Daubrée 1875a, 443-5; Rigaud 1880, 489-90) at Oxford. These reports revealed that not only the size, but also the composition of the coin series was extremely unusual for the area. Whereas normally coins of the second, third or fourth century AD dominate the coin series of votive deposits in springs north of the Alps, at Bourbonne there seemed to be an exceptionally high proportion of Augustan coins. The early reports by Daubrée and Rigaud contained obvious mistakes. Rigaud (1880, 490) claimed that there were 1,500 small bronzes of Julius Caesar. Given the fact that there are no known small bronzes of Julius Caesar at all, not to mention that his other coins were not that frequent either, it seemed clear that this was an error. However, Daubrée's report (1875a, 444) contains the clue to the cause of Rigaud's later mis-attribution. Daubrée states that there were 1,270 pieces of small module with the legend *Caesar imp.* and *Augustus divi f.* on the reverse, one type depicting an eagle, the other one a bull thus describing a large number of two, otherwise quite rare, *quadrantes* (RIC, 2nd ed., Augustus 227-8). While Daubrée recognised that these were coins of Augustus, Rigaud concluded that the obverse legend *Caesar imp(erator)* next to an imperial head referred to Julius Caesar. The rarity of these types and the fact that both Daubrée and Rigaud, were specialists in geology and hydraulic engineering, but not in antiquities, gave rise to some doubts. It seemed, nevertheless, reasonable to accept that the reports were probably by and large correct, and that there was indeed a large proportion of Augustan coins at Bourbonne. Furthermore, the fact that both reports agree that there were many halves, left little doubt that the find consisted of a substantial number of early imperial coins. Daubrée mentions that there were over 600 halves, while according to Rigaud there were 782. It does not require a coin expert to recognise a halved coin. As halving was an early imperial custom, and as neither Daubrée, nor Rigaud would probably have been aware of this, it was clear that the composition of the coin series was indeed very unusual. On the basis of these reports, I argued in my unpublished M.Stud.-thesis (Sauer 1996c), that Bourbonne was an Augustan army spa. Later in the same year, thanks to enquiries by my numismatic

supervisor, Dr Cathy King and those of Dr Michel Amandry of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, it became clear that many coins were indeed still in the local museum at Bourbonne-les-Bains. In December 1996 I went to Bourbonne-les-Bains, not knowing which coins were still there, and whether an examination of them would confirm or disprove the theory, I had advanced earlier in my M.Stud.-thesis. Mr Henri Troisgros, the director of the museum, kindly answered my enquiries, provided me with much important information and gave me access to the coins. During my visits slides of the obverses and reverses of all pieces in the collections were taken (most slides illustrating several coins), which allowed me to continue the task of identifying the coins at Oxford. During the second visit it was possible to refine and correct many identifications. The study of the coin assemblage not only confirmed that the early reports were largely correct, but it also permitted the reconstruction of the composition of the coin series and to place 89-90% of the coins in the period before and during the reign of Augustus.

It is necessary here to return to the question of how it was possible to re-discover a deposit unnoticed by all who wrote on the wider aspects of the monetary and political history of Gaul or Germany in the Augustan period. The answer is simple; most numismatists would not have read books on the water cult or the use of water; those who did read them, had for the most part an interest in ancient bath-houses, water management or religion, but rarely in coins. Thus I became aware of the deposit precisely because I am not mainly a numismatist and because I am not specialised in any other particular sub-discipline of Roman cultural history either. It is not easy to find the right words to express my belief that specialisation in the field of archaeology and ancient history, while to some degree necessary, has sometimes gone too far. One runs the risk of being accused of arrogance, as one always does if one challenges established research traditions and methodologies. It is easy to give the false impression that one considers one's own methodology to be far superior to that of established specialists. If this, however, is the definition of arrogance, then we need to be 'arrogant', since without questioning previous traditions nothing would ever change or improve. I hope this is not construed as arrogance (if a fairer way is used to define the meaning of the word), since I am well aware of the fact that a wider approach involves the risk of equivalent shortcomings in specialist fields, which this report may well contain. Nonetheless it is important to stress the fact that for over a century now one of the most important Augustan coin assemblages, despite several short publications, was known only to eminent local historians while being entirely ignored by the wider academic community. We can learn a simple, but fundamental lesson from this: we not only need

specialists in narrower fields of research, but also generalists and, most importantly, we need to be flexible and break free from the straitjacket of being either numismatists or archaeologists or historians.

Having become aware of the coins deposited in the Puisard Romain at Bourbonne-les-Bains, two options presented themselves: (1.) I could have suggested to a numismatist to pursue the examination of Bourbonne further leaving me to continue with more general studies, or (2.) I could try to determine the composition of the coin series myself. In the end the latter seemed preferable. With the aim being of becoming a generalist in archaeology and cultural history, gaining skill and knowledge in different research specialisms has always seemed attractive, while devoting the rest of my life exclusively to study in any particular field did not. Therefore I have endeavoured to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills and to produce a catalogue of the coins in the time available. The basis of the research involved the compilation of a complete and accurate description of all the coins, including any other information which was relevant, such the order in which the coins were arranged in the collections. This was clearly important as almost all of them seemed to be in the same order as they were in the 1920s and 1930s, thus allowing a comparison to be made with the earlier reports and helping to assess their reliability.

The numismatic section of the discussion, however, was written taking a somewhat different approach from that which many numismatists would have taken. The evidence is mainly numismatic; however, the numismatic discussion is to be seen as a means to an end, i.e. as an interim step to the wider assessment of the implications of the discovery for cultural history. It is not objects in themselves, but life in the past, that is my ultimate interest. What others might regard as deviations from the subject or methodological weaknesses are in fact central to this approach. Time and space devoted to the discussion of one aspect are inevitably at the expense of another. In this study certain aspects of a traditional numismatic report may have been given less attention than some may feel they deserve. For example, distribution maps of coin types, such as of the most common one, the eagle *quadrans*, have not been compiled. Others who are more competent in the field of the wider picture of coinage in Gaul will, it is hoped, do so in future and will be able to contribute to the interpretation of the wider circulation of this coin type. While the numismatic interpretation presented in this work may contain some shortcomings, that may have been avoided had a specialist solely devoted to numismatics dealt with the subject, it is probably fair to suggest that, if so, it would presumably have had other limitations instead; expertise in one field is mostly bought at the expense of another. The very wide cultural interpretations

which are based on the discovery from Bourbonne-les-Bains need no apology, unconventional as they may be. If the subject had not illuminated wider aspects of cultural history, it would not have merited for me the expenditure of so much time on it.

Having carefully considered for approximately five years all possible objections to the theory argued in this work that Bourbonne-les-Bains was an army spa, and having discussed the subject with other researchers, nothing emerged which caused me seriously to doubt it. I expect that a majority of scholars will accept the theory presented here as being the most probable one. However, there are still scholars (especially those with an inbuilt suspicion against the potential of non-written evidence) who doubt the overwhelming evidence yielded by the research of Wolfgang Schlüter and his colleagues for the location of the Varian disaster at the place where already Theodor Mommsen had located it (see 'Postscript'). Thus it would be very surprising if there were not some sceptics (probably even a higher proportion) who will doubt my theory, for which there is no direct written evidence at all. My hypothesis may be at most risk of being criticised by those who consider everything, they cannot explain otherwise, a hoard. The reasons for discounting the possibility that a deliberate selection of the smallest denominations is a hoard, deposited by an individual on a single occasion (a hypothesis, seriously considered by an anonymous numismatic referee of an earlier paper), will be explained below (in the chapter entitled 'A hoard deposited by an individual or votive offerings dedicated by many?'). Since, after much thought all objections I could think of seemed unconvincing, it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise in order to escape the potential accusation of presenting an unbalanced view. I am open to persuasion, should someone in future find convincing arguments against the theory argued here and propose a different explanation. Meanwhile I trust that the more clearly my interpretation is expressed here, the more I will stimulate those who doubt it to find counter-arguments.

Finally, the term 'cultural identity' in the title requires an explanation. There is no intention here to embark upon a wide-ranging discussion of cultural identity in archaeology. The subject has been extensively treated in several recent studies amongst which it is worth mentioning those edited by Graves-Brown, Jones and Gamble (1995) and Laurence and Berry (1998). It would seem inappropriate to engage in an extensive theoretical debate on cultural identity in the context of the examination of a specific coin deposit and its implications for monetary, political and cultural history. A brief discussion, however, may be useful.

Renfrew (1995, 130) bases his definition of ethnicity on eight factors:

- (1) shared territory or land
- (2) common descent, 'blood', ... i.e. genetic relationship
- (3) a shared language
- (4) a community of customs, or culture
- (5) a community of beliefs, or religion
- (6) a name, an ethnonym, to express the identity of the group
- (7) self-awareness, self-identity, ethnicity is what people in question believe it to be
- (8) a shared history, or myth of origin

It is not suitable here to elaborate on the subtle differences between a common ethnic and a common cultural identity. The examination of the votive deposit in Bourbonne-les-Bains certainly does not allow us to decide whether or not people mainly of one specific ethnic origin were represented, although there are very strong indications that the majority of dedicants in the Augustan period shared significant elements of a common cultural identity. Firstly, they appear to have been accustomed to the use of hot baths at a time before the native population of central and northern Gaul had first been exposed to the Mediterranean-style bathing culture. This hints that the group of spa visitors in the earliest years after the construction of the spa shared 'a community of customs, or culture,' Renfrew's point (4). By means of statistical analysis of the material evidence we can prove Renfrew's point (5), 'a community of beliefs, or religion:' the group of dedicants in the first years after the establishment of the spa were depositing coins in springs, whereas there is no convincing evidence that the native population of Gaul was engaging in the same custom at the time. Again in contrast to the native population, they rarely mutilated coins prior to deposition in a votive hoard. Thus there is little doubt that we are dealing with a group of people whose religious and ritual beliefs differed from those of the native population in Gaul. Comparative evidence shows that at the same time coins, notably of smaller denominations as at Bourbonne, were deposited in springs in Italy. This observation suggests that our group of dedicators or a significant proportion of them also shared Renfrew's criterion (1) in the sense of a common territory or land of origin. A further indication that criteria (1) and (5) apply to the group of our early spa visitors and dedicators of the coins is provided by the deliberate selection of right coin halves, depicting Augustus. This provides a positive link with the Italian ritual of depositing coins for the welfare of Augustus in the Lacus Curtius. If this hypothesis is accepted, we may reasonably conclude that the dedicators were also consciously aware of a shared history or mythology, Renfrew's point (8). If, as in case of the Lacus Curtius, some of the coins were offered in a collective ceremony, then we may also conclude that such a ceremony may have been the manifestation of an expression of self-identity (7) by

a distinctive group in society. Taken together all of these points indicate that we are dealing with Roman soldiers, a significant proportion of whom will have come from Italy. Indirectly this allows us to argue that criteria (3) and (6), a shared language (Latin) and a shared name (Roman) are also fulfilled. However, even if we are dealing mainly with Italians, as seems likely, criterion (2) is more difficult to establish. Considering the 'Celtic' migrations to northern Italy, the genetic difference between soldiers recruited in northern and central Italy may well have been as great as that between northern Italians and the inhabitants of eastern Gaul. However, this is not really relevant in the context of this study; what matters is that the group of dedicants perceived themselves as being part of a group different to those whose territory they occupied and that their actions reflect this. To what extent our group may also include some Roman citizens of non-Italian origin (from what we know about recruitment in the Augustan period these probably represent no more than a small proportion of legionaries) and perhaps even some auxiliaries of provincial origin and without citizenship, is difficult to assess. However, what is crucial here is that the whole group of dedicants, whatever the precise ethnic composition, assumed a common cultural identity and behaviour.

Why is this so relevant? Identity is normally very hard to prove by the means of archaeology. Surely, we know that those who owned villas in the northern provinces, for example, shared some common elements of an identity, such as some degree of wealth and social standing and an affiliation with imperial culture. However, many elements of their identity can in all but a few instances no longer be reconstructed: e.g. whether they were 'Romanised' natives, immigrants or the descendants of immigrants or whether they were of mixed ancestry and had adapted to a greater or lesser degree to the constantly evolving regional culture in the area. Similarly difficult questions arise when studying brooches of the migration period: can dress ornament reveal ethnic origin or did fashion soon spread to people of different ancestry?

Bourbonne-les-Bains is very interesting in this respect as, presumably, first-generation immigrants expressed their cultural identity here in a way which is distinctively different from native expressions of cultural identity. These different behavioural patterns manifest themselves in different attitudes to ritual coin mutilation and in whether or not specific images on left or right coin halves were preferentially chosen for offering. The different degree of access to fresh coinage is, of course, important to consider as well in this context. The large numbers of coins retrieved allow statistical evaluation and the foreign behavioural patterns lead to such distinctive numerical anomalies that they cannot possibly be

explained as anything other than as an expression of cultural identity by a distinct group. Thus Bourbonne-les-Bains allows the expression of cultural identity to be identified by means of mathematical analysis. The nature of this evidence enables us to go further than we can at most other sites: we are not simply dealing here with the different composition of animal bone assemblages from known military and civilian sites, for example; we are not merely confirming what is to be expected (e.g. that there are some differences between known military and civilian sites in patterns of deposition), but the much more challenging inverse method makes it possible to identify different cultural groups as such on the basis of their distinctive behaviour and the statistical evidence for it.